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## How Democracies Die review – Trump and the shredding of norms

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What's the worst thing to happen to US democracy recently? Most answers to that question start and end with Donald Trump. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, two Harvard political scientists, though as horrified by Trump as anyone, try to take a wider view. For them the great harbinger of disaster happened during the final year of the Obama presidency. Following the sudden [death of the conservative supreme court justice](#) Antonin Scalia in early 2016, President Obama nominated [Merrick Garland](#), a centrist liberal, to replace him. It was up to the Senate to decide whether to confirm the president's choice. **But the Senate did something it had never done in more than 150 years: it refused even to grant Garland a hearing.** This was not about Trump – most Republican senators were at this point deeply alarmed by, if not downright hostile to, the prospect of the Donald in the White House. Instead, it was about their shared view that any Republican supreme court nominee would be better than any Democratic nominee, and any price was worth paying to achieve that. It was **scorched earth politics.**

This was a preeminent example of what Levitsky and Ziblatt call the erosion of norms, which they consider the greatest threat to contemporary democracy. Norms are the unspoken rules and conventions that hold a democracy together, many of them based on the idea that what's good for your side in the short term may not do you any good in the long run, because you won't be in power for ever (if you are, it's no longer a democracy). When the other side get their turn, your impatience to take advantage will become their licence to exact revenge. It's a version of the old show business adage: you should be nice to people on your way up so they'll be nice to you on your way down. Clearly not everyone in showbiz lives by that rule. But in politics, at the moment, almost no one seems to.

In refusing to do what all their predecessors had done, however reluctantly, the Senate class of 2016 did not break the law. It was not a coup, but it was a refusal to play by the rules of the game – and to hell with the consequences. Levitsky and Ziblatt want to get away from the idea that so long as the constitutional order is intact, democracy will be OK. They are deeply suspicious of any naive faith that deviant politicians can be “contained” by the right institutions, and not just because it didn’t work out for Weimar Germany with Hitler. They point out that US history is littered with examples of political behaviour that stayed within the letter of the law but still did catastrophic damage to democracy. The racist regime that prevailed in the American south during the first half of the 20th century was underpinned by a set of norms that made hard-won African American voting rights meaningless. The constitution did not have to be overridden to allow this to happen. All it took was brutal thuggery and shameless intimidation, while the lawmakers in Washington sat on their hands.

The two primary norms that Levitsky and Ziblatt think underpin democracy are “mutual toleration” and “institutional forbearance”. They amount to the same thing: resisting the temptation to take every cheap shot going. This is where Trump comes in. There are many words that might describe his political style but toleration and forbearance are not among them. Trump treats the presidency as a platform designed for settling personal scores. He appears to be almost entirely lacking in impulse control, yet without impulse control there can be no lasting democracy. As a result, the US now has as its commander-in-chief the norm-shredder-in-chief as well. Levitsky and Ziblatt do not think Trump spells the death of US democracy. What they fear is what he will leave behind. He has taken the growing mistrust and mutual intolerance that preceded him and turbocharged it. Levitsky and Ziblatt call it “democracy without guardrails”: a helter-skelter race to the bottom.

How bad could it get? This book provides a swift survey of authoritarian politics around the world and finds the same pattern repeating itself. Twenty-first century strongmen do not suspend the constitution and replace it with tanks on the streets. They pay lip-service to the constitution while behaving as though it didn’t exist. Think of [Putin](#), formally swapping the role of president for prime minister in order to play by the rules, and thereby making a total mockery of them. Erdoğan in Turkey, Orbán in Hungary, Maduro in Venezuela, Modi in India (to name just a few): they all deride their

opponents as criminals, show contempt for their critics in the media, stoke conspiracy theories about opposition movements and question the legitimacy of any vote that goes against them. Trump is no different. A lot of this is name-calling rather than sticks-and-stones politics – and much of it happens on social media. But it also includes a wide tolerance of violence. Sticks and stones may still break your bones, but only if the name-calling doesn't silence you first.

That said, this is not a fatalistic book. It looks to history to provide a guide for defending democratic norms when they are under threat, and finds that it is possible to fight back. Mainstream parties can ally against authoritarianism, as happened for example in Belgium in the 1930s, when incipient fascism was defeated by the willingness of the rightwing Catholic party to join ranks with the liberals. Since the second world war the main parties of the left and right in Germany have shown a readiness to work with each other rather than allow extremism to gain a foothold in government ([they may be about to](#) do it again). In Chile, [Pinochet](#) was eventually defeated in 1989 by an alliance of Christian Democrats and Socialists, jointly committed to the preservation of democracy. The survival of democracy requires politicians willing to put long-term stability ahead of short-term gain and ready to recognise that what goes around comes around.



📷 In the shadow of authoritarianism ... protests outside the office of Zaman newspaper, Istanbul, over threats to press freedoms in Turkey. Photograph: Emrah Gurel/AP

But knowing what it takes is not the same as knowing how to make it happen. The great weakness of this book is that it regards history as a pick and mix of useful lessons for us to draw on. It treats context as though it were more or less irrelevant. Is today's US really much like 1930s Belgium? And if not, what possible use is it to tell 21st-century Republicans that they ought to learn from how

Belgian Catholic politicians resisted temptation a century ago? Context still matters. Levitsky and Ziblatt hold up the US Senate of the 1950s as an example of an institution where mutual forbearance was the essence of the rules of the game. But that same Senate was also the institution that effectively entrenched the racist order of the American south, as these authors acknowledge. Recognising that a club of old white men is capable of taking it in turns to enjoy the privileges of office is little help seeing how to do things once we believe that kind of club should be consigned to history.

Levitsky and Ziblatt criticise the great 18th-century French political thinker Montesquieu for insisting that good constitutional design was enough to constrain “overreaching power” – and for neglecting the importance of norms in making any political system work. But they neglect the thing that Montesquieu never forgot: that politics is also made by the social, cultural, economic and even climactic circumstances in which it happens. This book has remarkably little to say about the conditions that might be driving current popular discontent with democratic norms, including the impact of digital technology, the changing nature of work, the threat of rising inequality and the reconfiguring of gender relations, however far we still have to go.

We won't find the norms to stabilise democracy in this changed world by looking for them in the world it has supplanted. Levitsky and Ziblatt say that political parties and other gatekeepers are essential to ensure democracy stays the course. They lament the demise of the smoke-filled rooms of political insiders that kept the rabble-rousers at bay. But the smoke-filled rooms are long gone, seen off by smartphones and social media, not to mention 21st-century standards of health and safety. It's no good asking what will replicate them. We need to know how to get by without them.

This is a provocative and readable book, but in the end it is also an unsatisfying one. It shares the weakness of too much contemporary political science, by treating history as a useful guide to the future, despite the paucity of the dataset, the superficiality of much of the evidence, and the long track record we have of being surprised by what comes next. I say this as a historian: if we want to know how our democracies might die, we have to stop looking to our yesterdays.